

# Arab Customs and Culture



SECOND EDITION

MI COMPANY  
5TH SPECIAL FORCES GROUP (ABN)  
FORT BRAGG, NORTH CAROLINA 28307

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### SPECIAL NOTE

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## INTRODUCTION

The Middle East today is an area of immense strategic interest to the United States and its allies. Its huge oil reserves, particularly in the Arabian Peninsula, its strategic location as a land bridge joining Europe, Asia and Africa, and increased Soviet activity in the area have led the United States to seek a more active military role in the protection of the area. In order to promote U.S. interests along with international understanding and friendship, it is crucial for American soldiers operating in the Middle East to have a basic understanding of the Arab people, their customs and manners, and to adapt themselves accordingly. This guide is intended mainly for use by 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne) soldiers in pre-deployment preparation for mobile training missions, assessment teams and joint training exercises in the Middle East. Although references are made to the Arabian Peninsula, the contents of the guide apply to the majority of the Arab people and may be used by anyone interested in reducing some of the misunderstandings which occur unintentionally between people of different ways of life.



5TH SPECIAL FORCES  
GROUP (AIRBORNE)

## THE ARAB PEOPLE

**RELIGION AND HISTORY:** Islam, from the Arabic word "aslama" (submission), is a way of life for the Arab world. The Islamic religion began in 621 AD. It was revealed to Mohammed, the last prophet of the one god, Allah. Mohammed was born in Mecca in 570 AD. At age 40, he had a visitation from the Archangel Gabriel, who revealed to him the contents of the Koran, the Moslem holy book, and gave him the task of cleansing Mecca of pagan shrines. Forced to flee Mecca because of his teachings, he returned at the head of an army of followers and made it the main holy city of Islam. Within a short period, Islamic armies conquered and spread the faith in an area greater than that of the Roman Empire. With the death of Mohammed, the worshippers of Islam split into two factions, Sunnites and Shi'ites. The Sunni, which comprise 85 percent of today's 800 million Moslems, believe that the leadership of Islam can pass to any individual according to merit, much as secular leaders emerge. The Shi'a number approximately 80 million and take their title from Shiat Ali (Partisans of Ali). Ali was the son-in-law and cousin of Mohammed. They believe that only direct descendants of Mohammed should be leaders of Islam. Whatever their sect, Moslems practice the five duties required by the Koran (the five pillars of Islam):

Shahadah-Profession of the faith-"There is no god but god (Allah), and Mohammed is his prophet."

Salat-The recitation of prayers five times a day while facing towards Mecca (dawn, noon, late afternoon, sunset, evening).

Zakat-The giving of alms for charitable purposes.

Sawm-Fasting between first light and sunset during the holy month of Ramadan.

Hajj-Completion of a pilgrimage to Mecca by all believers able to do so at least once in their life.

**ISLAMIC LAW:** Islamic law, known as the Shari'a is perhaps the one aspect of the Arab culture which arouses the most prejudices among individuals not of the Islamic faith. The Shari'a is often thought of by non-Moslems as barbaric, cruel, inhuman, and uncivilized. It is often believed that judicial judgments such as the cutting off of a thief's hand or the stoning of the adulterer (as practiced primarily in Saudi Arabia) comprise the substance of Islamic law. These notions are incorrect. It is true that the law is very strict and harsh against the guilty. The Shari'a, however, is not merely a collection of "do's and don'ts," nor just a set of criminal laws prescribing punishments for certain crimes. Because the basic source of the Shari'a is considered the word of God revealed to the prophet Mohammed, the Shari'a encompasses the total relationship between the Moslem and his God. This relationship is expressed by the very word "Islam" (submission). The Moslem submits to Allah by following God's will and the guidance brought by the prophets as compiled in the Koran. The Shari'a is therefore considered to be the divinely ordained code of behavior and the prescribed way of life for man. To live in Islam is to live by the Shari'a. The second source of the Shari'a is the "Sunna" (the way or tradition), the life example set by the prophet Mohammed, consisting of what he did, or said, or approved during his prophethood while guiding and directing his followers. The other two sources are the Ijma, the historically continuous consensus of the Moslem community, and the Ijtihad, the human endeavor to understand and solve human problems in the light of the Koran and the Sunna. The Shari'a consists of things which are:

1. Expressly prohibited (Haram).
2. Expressly enjoined (Wajib).
3. Disliked but not prohibited (Mukruh).
4. Recommended but not enjoined (Mundub).
5. Simply permitted through silence (Mubah).

Many do not realize that whatever is not prohibited is permitted and a major part of human life lies under the Mubah. The Shari'a prohibits only a few things and stresses moderation and balance in all activities.

Although Islamic law may sound puzzling to the Westerner, its basic concept of divine manifestation cannot be amended to conform to changing human values or standards. It is an absolute norm to which all Moslem values and conduct must conform. The Shari'a is not equivalent only to laws enforceable through political authority, though they are an important and integral part of it. It overwhelmingly consists of morals, manners and regulations, ranging from worship to statecraft, which depend for compliance entirely upon a Moslem's conscience. Even in the absence of civil enforcement, the true Moslem is obligated to follow the prescribed code of behavior set forth in the Shari'a; the Moslem knows that to do otherwise would imperil his spiritual salvation.

The complexity of the Shari'a requires extensive personal study to appreciate fully its precepts. To condemn Islamic law without understanding its roots and how it encompasses the totality of the Moslem's life prejudices oneself against the full spectrum of the Arab culture.



The Koran (Qur'an) serves as a constitution for Moslems and is regarded as the holy book of Islam.

**SOCIETY:** Traditionally, the family has been the basis of the Arab social structure. Although the family is losing ground where social change is occurring most rapidly, family loyalty still predominates all aspects of life. The household is composed of kinsmen and, among the tribes, family ties evolve into tribal structure. The individual's loyalty to his family overrides most other obligations. Tribal or communal loyalties form the foundation and protect the existence of many governments in the Arab world. Inherited status normally outweighs personal achievements in determining one's place in society. Honor and dignity are tied to the good repute of one's family and especially to that of its women. Among the younger generations, however, a gradual trend toward a more liberal life is evident. Arab society is a man's world, where the role of women (particularly on the Arabian Peninsula) is severely restricted. Polygamy, although on the decline, is still a way of life in some Arab states. On the Arabian Peninsula women are generally kept veiled and secluded. Marriages are arranged by the family, and the duties of women are seen as service to the males of the household and giving birth to male offspring. Outside the Arabian Peninsula, more liberal views on education and the employment of women in the cities is gradually changing Middle Eastern society.

You will see members of the same sex walking hand in hand, touching, and hugging each other. To the Arab, these are signs of friendship, not sex. If an Arab likes you, he will touch you. On the other hand, touching between members of the opposite sex in public is considered in bad taste and obscene.



## ARAB MANNERS AND CUSTOMS

### Basic Rules

**GREETINGS:** Shake hands whenever you meet an Arab or leave him. Shake hands with both hands in order to symbolize that your intentions are peaceful (no hidden daggers). Upon entering or leaving a room, shake hands with everyone. Greet the oldest and most important individuals first. Guests should rise, out of respect, when an esteemed person enters a room. Rise also when shaking hands.

Arabs exchange a variety of pleasantries and love to chat. Learn some of the common Arabic greetings, both verbal and gesture, and use them yourself. Do not initiate them if you are unsure of how to. A full body embrace, accompanied with hugging, should not be initiated until you are sure that the Arab is a close friend. If the Arab initiates it, participate and consider yourself honored and/or accepted.

Two men kissing each other's cheeks when greeting with hands on each other's shoulders is a sign of friendship. This is only used, however, by two close friends who have not seen each other for more than a month.



**STATUS:** Arabs obtain status by birth into the right family instead of, as Americans do, through their personal achievements. Upward social mobility remains limited in the Middle East. Therefore, Arabs are very conscious of their status and will go to extremes to protect their respect, authority and power and, ultimately, that of their family. It is very important for an Arab to preserve his personal dignity and appearance to the rest of the world. Most Arabs are very modest, particularly in their own countries under the eyes of other Arabs. Do not place an Arab into an embarrassing situation in public, for instance, through undue attention or criticism (whether deserved or in jest) which may cause him to lose "face" in front of others. Equally important in the Arab world is the fact that anyone of importance, including Westerners of prominence, does not personally undertake manual labor, whether at home or at work. Labor is considered demeaning and can result in the loss of status and influence.

**CONVERSATION:** In any contact with Arabs, it is never appropriate to display impatience or undue haste because these traits are normally interpreted as evidence of insincerity or a lack of self-control. Conversation is opened with small talk and pleasantries, centered on the health and well-being of the participants and their respective families. However, avoid direct questions about female relatives. Stay away from political and religious subjects. Arabs will rarely, if ever, discuss their religion with non-Moslems. Avoid raising the subject for detailed discussion. Do not attempt to convert the Arab to your faith. A good basic rule on conversational subjects is to take the lead from what the Arab brings up. If he avoids you or changes the subject on you when you try to talk about something in particular, take the hint. Back off and try to figure out why the Arab was sensitive to the subject.

Avoid patronizing Arabs. Talk on an adult-to-adult level and do not talk down to someone if he doesn't

Speak English well. Be as clear and concise as possible in your speech. Slow your rate of speech, enunciate more precisely and avoid using slang expressions.

Be alert for nuances in the conversation. Arabs are hesitant to say "no" directly and are very reluctant to use the phrase "I don't understand." Often they will attempt to convey an idea through what would seem to an American as "double talk." It is common for an Arab to speak with a double meaning. Look out for it!

Avoid argumentative situations. Once an Arab has made a decision or had it made for him by a superior, it is unlikely that he will immediately change his mind. It is better to drop the argument for a while and approach the problem from a different direction later.

During conversations, the Arab custom is to stand very close (about one foot) to the person he is talking to. Although this may seem uncomfortable, don't move away from him to a normal "American speaking distance"; it would be considered impolite and would imperil any personal relationship you may be seeking. If you continue to feel awkward, drop one of your feet back and talk slightly over your shoulder. Arabs thoroughly assess a person prior to entering into a business or personal relationship. The close stance is a means, passed on through the centuries, to evaluate eye movement, smell and thermal qualities of the other person. Touching and patting are important parts of this evaluation process.

The Arabs believe that the eyes listen to the speaker's words more than the ears during conversation. "The eyes are the ladle of the words." Do not move your eyes around during direct conversation with an Arab; otherwise, he will be insulted because it will appear that you do not respect his words.



The Arab speaking distance is much closer than Americans are accustomed to and may seem uncomfortable. Eye-to-eye contact is essential.

**CRITICISM:** Unlike Americans, Arabs do not accept or give criticism directly. Even constructive criticism of an Arab's work or ideas in public is considered an insult. It is especially rude to contradict a person of status or a superior in rank or age. An Arab's ideas or suggestions should always be given recognition. If criticism is required, take the Arab aside privately and gradually lead up to the subject in an indirect and very tactful manner. American "frankness" is always too direct and usually misunderstood as criticism. Arabs understand and appreciate tact because it protects public image, avoids insult and displays culture.

Do not try to prove an Arab wrong with facts. Arabs are adept at reinterpreting facts to suit themselves, particularly when defending their dignity. Avoid placing any personal connotations of blame or in-

competence on an Arab. Always give the Arab a way out, perhaps something inanimate on which to fix the blame.

Above all, listen to and watch the Arab. He is a master of tact and diplomacy. Listen for the double meaning in his words and actions. For instance, whenever you present something as your idea, Arabs will always agree with you out of courtesy for your feelings. If an Arab hesitates prior to giving unconditional agreement, he may be signaling some difficulty with your proposal. Float new concepts as other than your personal ideas.

Always consider carefully what is or is about to be said in conjunction with how, when and in front of whom it is said. Avoid unintentional insults and misunderstandings by carefully evaluating all remarks.

**FRIENDSHIP:** Arabs take friendship very seriously. Whereas Americans form quick and casual friendships, the Arab concept of friendship is one of duration and intensity. Before the Arab enters into a friendship, he must find out all about you to see how much influence you have, what you can do for him and if you might embarrass him. Expect a healthy interest from the Arabs in your social, professional, and academic background. Misplaced confidences can seriously harm an Arab's family and position. Once a friendship is formed, you can expect the Arab to use all his influence and that of his friends to assist you. Remember, however, that the Arab system of friendship balances favors against obligations. When favors are asked by an Arab, never give a flat "no" because it will signal a desire to end a friendship. Instead, say "I'll see what I can do" or "I'm checking on it."

**GIFTS:** Never refuse an Arab's gift even if regulations require turning it in because of its value. Return gifts are not necessary unless you believe the friendship was particularly close.

**HOSPITALITY:** Hospitality is a byword among the Arabs whatever their station in life. As their guest, you will be treated with generosity and kindness. Hospitality is shown regardless of personal cost and is expected to be returned. Failure to show hospitality is inexcusable.

Host and guest rules provide that the person issuing the invitation is the host. This applies not only to the home but also to chance encounters in restaurants and casual invitations to lunch. If you meet in a cafe or restaurant, the person already there is immediately considered the host. It is rude of the host not to offer his table, food and drink. The new arrival should decline only if he is joining another party. The host most often will pay the bill; however, the person of higher status often takes over as host and pays, even though the person of lower status must maintain his dignity by attempting to pay. If an Arab asks you to go to lunch with him, he is the host. "Dutch treat" is not known in the Arab world. To protect your own public image and status, you must return hospitality. By the same token, do not refuse hospitality extended to you.

If invited to an Arab home, arrive about on-time. If a time is not specified in a casual invitation, 8 p.m. is proper. To an Arab a guest is God's gift and welcome at any time. Remember to show this same hospitality to an Arab if he visits your home unexpectedly. You are not expected to bring a present, unless you know the host and his preferences very well. Do not ask to see the kitchen, bedrooms or any other private areas of the house. Do not rearrange furniture for your own comfort; this is the host's responsibility. Even today it is not wise to express admiration or unusual interest for any of an Arab's belongings, valuable or otherwise, because it may be offered as a gift to you on the spot amid much embarrassment. If accepted, reciprocation is expected.

In their home or office, Arab hosts usually will serve tea and/or coffee in small cups or glasses. You may be asked if you prefer a hot or cool beverage. Accept the beverage as it is offered with the right hand and drink it slowly. Often a servant will stand by to refill your cup. To stop the refill, hold the cup towards the servant when he approaches and gently rock the cup back and forth several times, or simply hold your right palm over the top of the cup. No comment is required.

You may be invited to drink "Saadah," a bitter (often cardoman) coffee, drunk plain with no sugar or cream. The first cup of "Saadah" is known as the host cup and tradition calls for the host to drink first. The guest cup is second and the sword or strength cup is drunk third. If a fourth cup is served, it is known as the pleasure or welcome cup.



Never offer your left hand to an Arab in greeting; it is an insult. Always use your right hand in eating and drinking, or when offering, passing or receiving anything. This stems from the ancient custom of using the left hand for sanitation purposes.

In the Arab home, expect to be served and to eat a large meal. Failure to eat or drink something is an insult to the host. It is a compliment to the host's efforts to fill one's plate and eat with gusto. Remember to use only the right hand at a traditional feast where there is no silverware. However, no guest need feel embarrassed nor hesitate to take a fork into the left hand at a more conventional dinner. Be prepared for numerous courses and servings of food. Don't be afraid to ask questions about what strange dishes are. Try everything, if possible. After you eat, compliment the host on the food and wish that he always is blessed with a full table. A common phrase used when standing up after eating is "Al-hamdu lillah wa shukran" ("Thanks and praise to God"). Unlike convention in the Western world, guests do not linger long after a meal or the decision to terminate a visit. There may be the serving of another round of coffee or tea but then guests are expected to take their leave. Upon leaving, remember to shake hands and thank the host profusely for his hospitality and good conversation. Do not refer specifically to the food and drink when departing.

When entertaining Arab visitors or guests, particularly within their country, cater to their expected customs of hospitality. Invite your guests personally. Don't mix Arabs of different ranks or status too much. Stay around your own status level. Always see to your guests' comfort and make them welcome at any time. The host should never urge an Arab to uncover his head. Don't ask if your guest would like refreshment; instead, either ask his preference or simply serve what is available. Serve food, even a meal, to insure your guest is not hungry. Never give the appearance of wishing to terminate the visit, regardless of the press of business. Always accompany a guest outside the door or gate upon his departure. Shake hands and thank him for his visit to your residence.

When sitting with an Arab, do not point the soles of your feet at him. Pointing your soles at him tells him that you are placing him under your feet, i.e., you are equating him with dirt. Place your feet flat on the floor if in a chair, or fold them under you if sitting on the floor. Never place your feet on furniture.

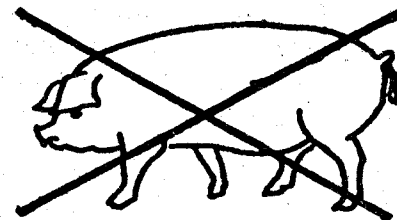


Proper



Improper

**FOOD AND DRINK:** Moslems are forbidden to eat pork. The drinking of alcoholic beverages is also frowned upon, at least in public. Although not all Moslems adhere to these restrictions, it would be insensitive to offer pork or alcohol to a Moslem. Do not drink alcoholic beverages in public or appear drunk in public. In many Arab countries, drunkenness is a criminal offense. A flourishing blackmarket in alcohol may exist in some areas but penalties for participation can be severe.



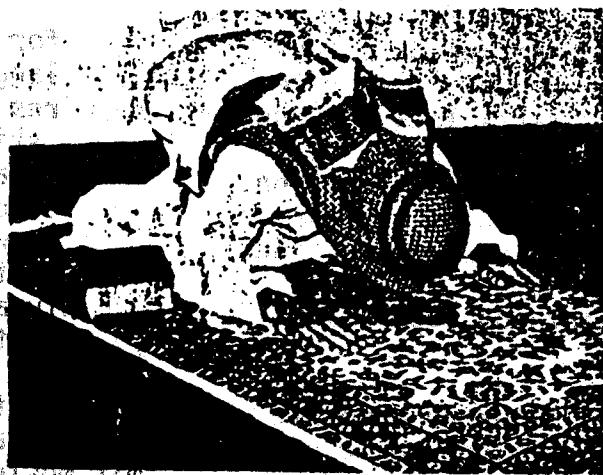
Dieses Gericht enthält kein Schweinefleisch.  
This meal does not contain pork.  
Ce plat ne contient pas de viande de porc.  
Yemeklerimiz domuz etinden hazırlanmamıştır.

هذا الطعام خال من لحم الخنزير  
این غذا شامل گوشت خوک نمیباشد

(Such warnings are often used on Mideast airlines.)

**TIME:** Do not try to force your "foreign speed" on the local people. The saying, "Haste makes Waste," truly applies in the Arab society and a common Arabic proverb says, "Haste is from the devil and patience is from Allah." Expect people to be late for appointments. Arriving too early or "on time" indicates in the Arab world an eagerness to please and can be misinterpreted as "hustling." Do not expect Arabs to make firm plans beyond a week or to stick to firm details beyond that time. The Moslem religion prohibits tampering with the future; therefore, projects are not planned in detail months and years ahead of time as Westerners do on paper.

**RELIGION:** Mosques are closed to all non-Moslems unless special permission is obtained. If you obtain permission to visit a mosque, remove your shoes prior to entering, speak only in whispers, and do not attempt to take photographs. You will see Moslems at prayer wherever they happen to be when the call for prayer is heard. Do not stare or take photographs while they are praying. Respect the requirement for Moslems to fast during the holy month of Ramadan. Do not offer food, beverages or tobacco products to Moslems during the hours of fasting (dawn to sunset) and attempt to avoid eating or smoking in their presence. In some Arab countries, soldiers on duty are exempt from the fasting requirement.



The Prayer rug is a ritually clean space for prayer. Worship is oriented toward the sacred Ka'ba in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. The prayer rug often contains symbols representative of some beliefs of Islam. The symbols are usually highly stylized because of Islam's prohibition against the representation of animals and human beings on any article that might enter the mosque or place of worship.

**PHOTOGRAPHY:** Do not take pictures of military installations and equipment, military or civilian police, and civilian airport or seaport facilities without permission of the host country. Do not photograph people at close range (particularly women) without permission. If you do photograph people, utilize a long-range lens (135-200mm) so as not to appear obtrusive. Avoid photographing people while they are praying. Children like photographs and will yell, "Sura, Sura" (picture, picture). If you have a polaroid camera, make friends first by giving them a few shots and then use a 35mm camera or other type for your own pictures.



Watch out for those feet!!!

# THE MIDDLE EAST



**BARGAINING:** Learn to bargain for almost everything in the Middle East. Bargaining is a respected part of the business procedure, and shopkeepers expect you to take the time to participate in the ceremony and social exchange associated with buying. Before you actually start to bargain, shop around or ask friends about how much something should cost. If possible, get to know the shopkeeper and his reputation. Learn to tell the difference between the many asking prices, such as the "insult price," the "Go away price," the "I don't want to sell price," and prices which suggest, "I'm willing to sell but not enthusiastic"; "I would like to sell," "I'm anxious to sell" and "You're a close friend." Arab shopkeepers tend to cater more to the first customers of the day in anticipation of making the first sale of the day. It's best to bargain in Arabic but ask the seller to write the asking price down if you have any doubt about it. **NEVER ARGUE.** Never demean the object. The shopkeepers respect knowledge, skill and wit. Generally, the more often you use the item or the less expensive it is, the less time you should spend bargaining for it. Once you accept a price, you are obligated to buy at the agreed price.

**ARAB SYMBOLISM:** The color **BLUE** is associated with magical powers and is thought to have the power to ward off the evil eye. Persons with blue eyes, however, are also believed to have the power to employ the evil eye.

**GREEN** is the holy color of Islam. The Prophet's cloak had supposedly the same shade of green as the Saudi flag.

Moslems attach special significance to the number **FIVE**. It is used to represent the five pillars of Islam, the five members of Mohammed's family, the five daily prayers or the five fingers of Mohammed's daughter, Fatima.

The **LEFT HAND** is also considered evil or at least

an instrument of evil.

The raised, **OPEN HAND** (like the number five) is a powerful sign of good luck and able to overcome the evil eye.

The **BEARD** symbolizes a man's integrity.

The **MOUSTACHE** is a symbol of an Arab man's virility, masculinity, dignity, and strength.



When a Arab strokes his moustache in connection with an oath or promise, it is a sign of sincerity. It is an insult to touch or verbally denigrate a Moslem's moustache.

**WOMEN:** Respect the privacy of Arab women wearing the veil. Avoid staring and lengthy eye contact. Do not try to engage an Arab woman in conversation unless you have been formally introduced. Do not attempt to photograph Arab women unless you have permission. You should include male family members in any picture of Arab women.

**WORKING WITH ARABS:** To Arabs, the person they are dealing with is more important in essence than the mission or task. Impress the Arab through knowledge, quiet strength and politeness. Be patient and never begin instruction or undertake a task without adequately greeting the students or seeing to their comfort. Never lose your temper because such an outburst will have an opposite effect.

Anticipate little action being taken on an Arab's decision, particularly in administrative planning matters, until close to the required deadline and then only if circumstances are favorable. Coordinate the use of training sites and material continually.

Plan for extra training time. Training in a foreign language or through the use of an interpreter requires additional time. The Arab's lack of technical skills (not aptitude) and his right-to-left visual pattern also slow Western-style instruction. Furthermore, most Arabs learn through rote memorization which necessitates repetitious instruction and constant drilling. Speak slowly, pause frequently and repeat teaching points by rephrasing your instruction often.

Anticipate religious activities. Insure adequate time is available in the training schedule to permit Moslems to conduct their daily prayers. Do not schedule intensive training activities during the fasting month of Ramadan or over other holidays.

Use practical exercises and discussion periods to determine the Arab student's comprehension. An Arab will never say, "I don't understand"; such a statement can imply incompetence on his part as a student or reflect badly on the instructor's capability to teach. Appearances and status are often more important than the instruction to the Arab.

Start with the non-technical aspects of any instruction. Show and demonstrate equipment before lectur-

ing on its technical operation. Use films and slides to increase comprehension. Add Arabic descriptions to the English text.

If you have the option, train officers and enlisted men separately. An enlisted man scoring ahead of an officer in class standing embarrasses the officer.

Maintain your status as an expert. Do not admit to not knowing an answer. If necessary, say something like, "I'll show you where to get the answer" or "I'm busy now but please return later for the answer."

Employ an Arab on your training team to help with translation if necessary and, equally important, to troubleshoot culturally inappropriate or offensive training materials.

Do not criticize or reprimand an Arab in public. In any situation in which an Arab is not meeting an instructor's standard, talk personally to the Arab about his deficiencies in an indirect and very tactful manner. Respect his individual dignity. Turn serious problems over to another Arab.



Watch the Arab and learn his customs!

## ARAB GESTURES

Arabs, like most people, use gestures and body movements to communicate. It has been said that "To tie an Arab's hands while he is speaking is tantamount to tying his tongue." The importance of shaking hands, touching, and use of the right hand have already been discussed. Although there are numerous other gestures associated specifically with the Arab culture, the following have been identified as some of the most common and widespread in the Arabian Peninsula:



The gesture of placing the right hand or its forefinger on the tip of the nose, on the right lower eyelid, on top of the head, on the mustache or beard has the meaning of "It's in front of me, I see it or it's on my head to accomplish." Another meaning is "It's my obligation."



Forefinger and thumb of one or both hands on the jacket lapel; or one or both hands held at chest height, palms open and facing out, has the meaning, "It's not my responsibility."



Right hand out, palm down, with fingers brought toward oneself repeatedly in a clawing motion, is the sign for calling someone to come.



Placing the palm of the right hand on the chest immediately after shaking hands with another man shows respect or thanks. This gesture is often used when refusing food, in which case the heart is patted several times. In both cases, a very slight bow of the head may also be added.

After shaking hands upon greeting or departure, the brief holding of a friend's or guest's hand with two hands is a common gesture of friendship.

Touching the tips of the right fingertips to the forehead while bowing the head slightly shows deep respect. Kissing the forehead or the back of a dignitary's hand connotes extreme respect but is not common or generally allowed, although worth knowing.



By holding the fingers in a pear-shaped configuration with the tips pointing up at about waist level and moving the hand slightly up and down, the Arab signals, "Wait a little bit" or "Be careful."

This gesture can be observed extensively when driving in the crowded streets of the Arab cities. In such a locale, it may mean, "Give me a little room" or "Please let me pass." It may be accompanied by curses from an anxious taxi driver or a pedestrian trying to cross the street.



Grasping the chin with the thumb side of the right fist is a sign of wisdom or maturity. Often used by women more than by men.



Hitting the side of one's face with the palm of one hand, head slightly tilted, and eyes wide open, is meant as an expression of surprise.



Flicking the right thumbnail on front teeth can be translated to mean "I have no money" or "I have only a little."



Biting the right forefinger, which has been placed sideways in the mouth, may be a threat or an expression of regret.



In western culture the "A-OK" sign is a positive gesture. However, in the Arab world, if the gesture is shaken at another person it symbolizes the sign of the evil eye. An Arab may use the sign in conjunction with verbal curses.

This sign can be used in the Arab world to mean "Perfect," if it is held (not waved) at chest height and used when talking about something good.



Hitting the right fist into the open palm of the left hand indicates obscenity or contempt.



Placing the tips of the left fingers and thumb together so that hand faces right, then placing the tip of the right forefinger directly on the left finger tips indicates an obscenity or insult directed at one's birth or parentage. Specifically "You have five fathers."

Additional gestures commonly seen include:

Placing the palm of the right hand on the chest, bowing the head a little and closing one's eyes connotes "Thank you" (in the name of Allah).

Kissing one's own right hand and then raising one's eyes and that hand to heaven with the palm up means "Thank you" (in the name of Allah).

Touching noses together three times when greeting is an old Bedouin gesture of friendship and respect.

A quick snap of the head upwards with an accompanying click of the tongue connotes "No," "Perhaps" or "What you say is false."

By joining the tips of the right thumb, forefinger and middle finger, and then moving the configuration rapidly in front of the body, an Arab will add emphasis to his speech.

Patting another person's shoulder with the right hand is a conciliatory gesture.

Before serving coffee, a bit of it may be poured onto the ground. This is a Bedouin gesture of sacrifice.

During the Hajj (Pilgrimage), people may kiss only on the shoulders as a gesture of friendship and greeting.

Flipping the hand near the mouth and simultaneously making a clicking sound with the tongue and teeth is used to indicate that a person is not to worry.

By holding the right hand in front of the face with the back facing forward and then flipping the hand so that the palm is up, the Arab will indicate the negative or "No".

Open hand, palm down, pointed in a particular direction and accompanied by the phrase "Il-Khamsi bil'een" (The five in the eyes) is a gesture to ward off the evil eye.

Shaking the index finger sideways is similar to the Western gesture which connotes "No" or indicates the negative.

A snap of the forefinger or middle finger on the thumb is similar to the Western gesture which indicates the individual "forgot something."

A gentle graze of the chin of another person with the right fist of a friend is an admonition not to argue.

Holding the right hand, with the back forward, and lightly brushing the tips of fingers beneath the chin several times with a forward motion is an old sign of an insult.

#### IMPORTANT NOTE

Gestures indicating obscenities or insults should not be used by a non-Arab. Arab gestures of this type have varying degrees of intensity. Depending upon circumstances and country, incorrect usage could lead to serious offenses and cause diplomatic incidents.

#### FOR MORE INFORMATION

See the article, "Arabic Gestures," by Robert A. Barakat, which appeared in the Journal of Popular Culture, Spring 1973.

## COMMON PHRASES IN THE ARABIC LANGUAGE

Classical Arabic, the language of the Koran, is the accepted standard for the written language. However, spoken Arabic differs from country to country. The Arabic expressions below are spelled phonetically. Long vowels are distinguished from short vowels by doubling the letter. All are pronounced distinctly as follows:

a as the u in but	aa as in had
e as in bet	ee as the ai in bait
i as in bit	ii as the ea in beat
o as in bore (but shorter)	oo as in boat
u as in put	uu as the oo in boot

Most Arabic consonants are similar to their English equivalents, but the following are quite different:

q is a k sound made far back in the throat.

kh is a sound from the back of the throat resembling ch in achtung.

gh is a guttural sound, something like gargling.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

Contact the Defense Language Institute, Monterey, CA.

A handy, pocket guide for the Middle East traveller, which is available through most bookstores, is Arabic For Travellers by the Staff of Editions Berlitz S.A., Lausanne, Switzerland, 1975.

## ENGLISH

God Bless you  
 God willing  
 Please  
 Thanks  
 Welcome  
 Yes  
 No  
 How are you? To a man  
                                     To a woman  
 Good morning  
 Good evening  
 Good bye  
 Good bye (reply)  
 Do you speak English  
 Excuse me  
 Where is.....?  
 Money  
 Car  
 Hotel  
 Market  
 Tea  
 Coffee  
 Airport  
 Ticket  
 Hospital  
 Police station  
 Street  
 City, town  
 How much? How many?  
 Expensive  
 What is the matter?  
 On your left  
 On your right  
 Straight on  
 When?  
 Go  
 Come  
 I do not have

## ARABIC PRONUNCIATION

Barak allah fiik  
 In-shaallah  
 Min Fadlak  
 Shukran  
 Ahlan wa sahan  
 Na'am; aiwa  
 La  
 Kaif haalak; A-shlon-ak  
 Kaif haalik; A-shlon-ik  
 Sabaah il-khair  
 Masaa il-khair  
 Fi aman illah  
 Ma'a as-salaama  
 Tatakallam Inghilizi  
 Mut'assif  
 Fain; Wain; Aina.....?  
 Flous; Nuqood  
 Sayyara; Arabiyya  
 Hutail; Funduq  
 Suuq  
 Shahi  
 Qahwa  
 Mataar  
 Tazkara  
 Mustashfa  
 Markaz il-buliiz  
 Shaara  
 Madiina  
 Kam?  
 Ghaali  
 Aish fi?  
 'Ala shimaalak  
 'Ala yamiinak  
 Doghir; 'ala tuul; ala qudaam  
 Emta; Meta?  
 Imshi  
 Ta'al  
 Ma'indi

## ENGLISH

Please accept  
Give me  
Bring me  
Stop  
I do not know  
It doesn't matter  
American Embassy  
Where is it on this map?  
Monday  
Tuesday  
Wednesday  
Thursday  
Friday  
Saturday  
Sunday  
Yesterday  
Today  
Tomorrow  
1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
100

## ARABIC PRONUNCIATION

Itfaddal  
Haat; A'thii  
Haat lee; jeep lji  
Qif  
Ma a'arif  
Ma a'alash  
As-sifaara l-'amrikiyya  
Fain'ala lkhaarlita  
Youm 'al-itnain  
Youm 'al-talaata  
Youm 'al-arba'a  
Youm 'al-khamis  
Youm 'al-jumaa  
Youm 'as-sabt  
Youm 'al-ahad  
'Ams  
'Al-youm  
Boukra or Ghadan  
Wahid  
Itnain  
Talaata  
Arba'ah  
Khamsah  
Sittah  
Saba'ah  
Tamanyah  
Tis'ah  
'Ashara  
Miya

## SOME FINAL WORDS

No written guide could fully prepare a newly-arrived westerner for the diversity and complexity of customs which may be encountered in an Arab society. However, one can take comfort in the fact that Arabs are accomplished masters at making a guest feel welcome and comfortable, and are scrupulous in observing social amenities as the host. Furthermore, the people are quick to recognize and appreciate sincerity and no visitor can go wrong by observing traditional respect and consideration for the feelings, customs and benefits of others.

Remember that you are in an environment much different than that of the United States. The Arab world is governed by tribal traditions coupled with Islamic principles and precepts. Although many Arabs may be tolerant of your ways and your beliefs, officially, Islamic law must be adhered to and obeyed. US officials in-country can acquaint you with "do's and don'ts" in your host country. Heed their advice. The United States does not have Status of Forces Agreements with most of the Arab countries. That means your desires may come in last in an argument. It is therefore best to avoid disagreements or situations which might lead to arguments. It is you who are the foreigner.

If you show respect for the cultural ways of the Arab world, your stay in the Middle East will be much more enjoyable. Learn as much as you can about the country that you will visit prior to departing the USA.

Remember, you have been sent to assist a people eager to advance. They may not always demonstrate the enthusiasm or ability you might want them to but they are anxious to learn. For the most part your Arab partners may not have the technological background, the education or the awareness of

## SELECTED REFERENCES

machinery operation and maintenance which we in the United States grow up with and take for granted. Work with them closely and allow for as much demonstration and hands-on training as possible.

There is much to enjoy in the Middle East and a great deal to learn. Your understanding and enjoyment of the Arab culture will depend on how you use your time in the host country. Seek out knowledge. Make friends. Mission accomplishment can be enhanced through cultural and personal awareness.

All comments and/or recommendations pertaining to the contents of this booklet will be welcomed and should be addressed to: Commander, Military Intelligence Company, 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne), 1st Special Forces, Fort Bragg, North Carolina 28307.



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